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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
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of Minorities
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Item 12 of the agenda

REVIEW OF FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN FIELDS WITH WHICH THE SUB-COMMISSION HAS BEEN OR MAY BE CONCERNED

Written statement submitted by the Agence Internationale pour le Développement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 August 1998]

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INCLUDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN SCHOOL CURRICULA

1. The fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is to be celebrated on 10 December 1998, is an opportunity to remind all Governments that they must work together - as laid down in the Charter of the United Nations - to "promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" and to encourage NGOs to engage in more vigorous and active efforts to create an awareness of human rights among various strata of the population. Human Rights Year - 1998 - is the opportunity for us to evaluate implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted in 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights.

2. Although at present no one can be in any doubt about the progress made by the United Nations in terms of realizing and asserting human rights in many countries of the world, it remains the case that some populations are not free of dictatorial governance, which is recognized to be the prime source of human rights violations. But this should not allow us to forget that certain democratic countries are themselves less than scrupulous in their fundamental respect for these basic rights.

3. The truth is that the effort to set standards is not complete, and that is why the United Nations is giving greater impetus to its specialized agencies, projects and programmes with a view to securing better results in terms of human rights and freedoms.

4. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, humankind as a whole is called upon to give its unshakeable support to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, because no one is now in any doubt, with world poverty reaching an alarming level, that the practice of democracy not only protects individuals and respects their dignity but also makes it possible to gain access to economic and social development. Today, the spread of poverty continues to affect a growing section of the world's population and endangers human rights. For the first time in history, heads of State and Government were invited, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, to recognize the universal importance of social development. Although those heads of State and Government expressed differing points of view at that forum, they were unanimous in acknowledging that poverty, unemployment and social exclusion have now attained such proportions as to directly affect the human condition and the most elementary rights.

5. Everyone agrees that a considerable number of people are leading lives of indigence, adversity and marginalization, so we consider it a matter of urgency that a start be made in combating the phenomenon of exclusion on various fronts. It should begin with the economic front, and then the cultural and social fronts, setting in place educational plans to limit the spread of racial hatred and intolerance. Positive steps must be taken to overcome difficulties such as illiteracy, poverty and lack of freedom of expression.

6. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents a stimulus for our association to promote the wide-ranging action we have been carrying out for years with a view to establishing an awareness of the various problems concerning human rights and

fundamental freedoms both among public opinion and with politicians. This activity falls within the ambit of mass information and communication on behalf of respect for human rights, for the efforts made by the United Nations and other agencies will remain a dead letter unless the legislative texts and legal obligations are known to all. Knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms by everyone is vital, and must be achieved by organizing objective and impartial education and information campaigns aimed at every section of the population, and especially immigrants, because civic education is particularly essential for populations with little or no democratic experience.

Consequences of North-South disparities

7. The fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be devoted to bringing out the serious distortions which exist between North and South in terms of economics, and to seek the urgent cooperation necessary across the world for the alleviation of poverty.

8. Our view has always been that it is not possible to dissociate economic development and the democratization of political systems. This implies pressure by the United Nations on some anti-democratic regimes which persist in flouting the most basic rights. If we are to entertain dreams of a better world, we should make social development our common strategy so as to ensure global and sustainable human development based on respect for the rights of the person.

9. To begin with this presupposes:

democratic and socio-economic advances in the developing countries, linked to genuine international cooperation, in order to establish new North-South relations;

outright cancellation of the debt which continues to be a burden on many countries of the third world, paralysing development projects and therefore democracy; and

the establishment of sound and objective relations between the different countries, so that these relations are no longer determined by economic considerations in which opportunism plays a leading role, because it often happens that people pretend not to notice human rights violations where in fact they are rampant, simply in order not to jeopardize those relations.

10. Let us remind ourselves that the future of the industrialized countries depends in part on the development and industrialization of the developing countries, for poverty and hunger, which are rampant in the countries of the third world, jeopardize the prosperity of the industrialized countries and at the same time cooperation with them. It is therefore a matter of some urgency to give clear and focused consideration to ways of solving these problems. One must face the facts and admit that the rich countries have their share of responsibility for the underdevelopment of the third world.

11. With the gap between North and South growing ever wider, it is not surprising that some populations aspire to a better standard of living. The

phenomenon of South-North migrations is merely a consequence of this state of affairs. The immigration measures taken by the countries of the North do not make any reference to the real causes of this phenomenon, and we think that its origins are to be sought in the lack of democracy which lies behind migrations of a political nature, and also in the failure of development policies which lies behind economic migrations.

12. We consider that some of the concepts used should be re-thought, particularly the concept of development, which is too often presented as an indicator of economic growth, with human dignity increasingly appearing as a futile factor of no great importance. We think that it is time for technical and scientific progress to respond to a series of priorities. These priorities have to be put in perspective if we really want to alleviate the effects of unemployment and poverty.

13. On the eve of the new millennium, respect for human rights, democracy and the law-based State must be enshrined as essential elements throughout the world, failing which the inability to prevent crises will run the risk of seriously compromising the future of humankind as a whole. In the past 50 years the wealth of nations has multiplied sevenfold, but nevertheless too many people still endure destitution, unemployment, social disintegration and their consequences, marginalization and violence. In many countries, whether developed or developing, the gap between rich and poor is growing ever wider.

14. We are faced today with a painful problem, which is a matter of shame and even failure for our civilization. Let us remind ourselves that more than 840 million people in the world are living below the poverty threshold. Some 120 million are officially unemployed, and millions have refugee or displaced-person status. The tragic consequences that result have a disastrous effect on the stability of societies. Such situations seriously jeopardize health, peace and security throughout the world, to which can be added malnutrition, famine, drug problems, crime, terrorism, xenophobia and transmissible and chronic endemic diseases.

15. Despite the optimistic tone of so many meetings, conferences and summits, the world has not changed; numerous populations across the various continents still find themselves below the poverty threshold. Our objective is not to disparage the contribution made by these European or international conferences, or the profound benefits they have already brought or will bring to humankind, but it should be pointed out that all the resolutions, past and future, relating to the phenomenon of development will never be put into practice unless the obstacles of debt and lack of freedom of expression are overcome.

16. How could the developing countries take responsibility for themselves when they are stifled by debt repayments? And how is a development alternative to be found if people cannot freely express their political and economic choices and become genuine actors? The reason why none of the resolutions on development have resulted in tangible change in the countries of the South is that they encountered a major obstacle in the lack of democracy and respect for human rights at national and international level.

17. For our part, we see our duty as a non-governmental organization as stating our commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and as wanting the United Nations to enter the twenty-first century with the resources to enable it to serve the progress of humankind. The fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be the occasion - and this is the object of our modest statement - for us to express our desire to see the United Nations give education and awareness of human rights problems their proper place by integrating them in their own right in school curricula.

18. We are not really claiming - in these few pages - to offer a miracle solution to the problem of human rights, or to determine all its various aspects. We have merely tried, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary, to give an extra boost to the struggle against human rights violations. Our faith in a better future is unquestioned.